

Why the French Revolution was a Historical Necessity

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On the eve of the Revolution the nation of France enjoyed nearly a millennium as one of the major players in Western civilization. Situated between the old Roman lands to the south, the Germanic tribes to the East and Britons across the channel, a Frankish kingdom had grown into a French nation thanks to the courage and fortunes of some of the greatest figures in the Western tradition. The Merovingian, Carolingian, and especially the Capetian dynasties solidified a French identity in former Gaul that would be handed down into the 18th century. During this last millennium before the Revolution, traditions became common law, entrenched in the fabric of what it meant to be a French subject. These traditions would be challenged in France like they were being challenged across Europe. Challenged by humanistic thought, empiricism, and finally "enlightened" ideas. France and England were part of an exclusive club of truly large "modern" nations in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries and parliament had taken the head of a king in England in 1649 and though the monarchy was restored, the powers of parliament would always be the senior partner in the running of the country. Therefore France, as a modern nation teaming with perhaps the greatest enlightened thinkers and ideas could not continue in its traditions, in its absolutist monarchy, and remain the world's society that it had become at this critical point.

Tradition and religion The divine right of kings and everything that comes with it, vassals, tax collecting, conquest, a legacy, but also it meant being *Pater Patriae* to his subjects. Shennan writes "This [absolutism] did not mean however that their [the king's] power was despotic, for that would have implied a refusal to recognize that their subjects possessed private and public rights. The French themselves made a clear distinction between absolute and despotic rule and it was the basis on which the king of France founded his authority which made the decisive difference."¹ So we see that the king would not think of running roughshod over the rights of his people no matter what their status. 18th century France no longer could accept this consideration on the part of their king as completely satisfactory. Individual rights and laws of nature were creeping into the thought processes of the growing literate middle class² and examples of republican government in America and England further empowered those people to question any kind of stratified system such as France had with the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, estates, not to mention an absolutist monarchy who seemed cut off from the intellectual currents of their time. Even though King Louis XVI tried to address the issues of the people and the parlement, he still exercised his absolute power as late as 1787 when he deprived parlement of a vote on Loménie de Brienne's fiscal proposal by stating "It is legal because I wish it."³

As I stated earlier, France, unlike the loose confederations that made up German, Italian, and Spanish lands, and unlike Russia was modernized and in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, was a large centralized power. The other large centralized industrialized power was England. I do not intend to argue that the English Civil War of the 17th century or the Glorious Revolution of the later part of that century can be compared to the French Revolution, nor will I argue that it inspired the Revolution. I will however assert that there are some parallels that are difficult to ignore. Both countries were vast by European standards and had strong centralized power. Even though the English Parliament was by law a governing body, the king still exercised some absolute powers and in fact used Royal Prerogative to dissolve parliament. The less authoritative Estates-General of France had not been convened since 1614. Most importantly it was the moral authority of people like Oliver Cromwell and the Rump parliament that reflected an ideological divide between king and state. In other words, no longer would could the king hold himself up as the state and assume his subjects to rally to him on these

grounds. In the case of England, the state could be rallied to against even the king. It seems that in France it took longer to make this distinction between king and state because of the personalities of the leaders. King Louis XIV proved to be more effective working with the nobility and bourgeois than Charles I and thus avoided alienating those that could challenge his authority. Louis XIV's death in 1715 left large shoes to fill and history proved that his heirs were not up to the task of filling them. There is a feeling from reading about Louis XV and Louis XVI that they were detached from currents swirling around France in the 18th century. It was now left to these absolute rulers to keep a population that was becoming increasingly more aware of their natural rights from demanding the same rights that cobblers and yeoman farmers enjoyed in England and the new United States.

It seems quite hypocritical that France during the period before the Revolution would give rise to progressive thinkers like Descartes, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau who would influence readers to their ideas around the world. "They were anxious to demonstrate that human reason was man's best guide in organizing society and government."⁴ Shennan writes. This actually speaks to the toleration and freedoms that these men enjoyed under Louis XIV-VI. It is precisely because they are somewhat well to do men that their works are read though. France was the *lingua franca* of educated Europe and French fashion was the standard by which other well to do people wished to achieve. A majority of the thinkers, artists, tailors, and in other words, trendsetters are from the upper part of the 3rd Estate, the estate that has the majority of the people but the least amount of power in a nation which is driven financially and culturally by them. The traditions in place to ensure order in the French kingdom now became obstacles to the very people they were intended to protect. No reforms from the king, his administrators, or parlement short of full majority representation would stop the awakened 3rd Estate from taking control.

It must seem easy to draw a conclusion such as the one presented writing over 200 years later, but no where in history does a head so offend a body that the whole person lives untroubled. The 3rd Estate was no longer the docile people that relied on the 1st and 2nd Estates to describe the world to them. The world had changed from those times and it was only by the efforts of sly kings and politicians that the absolutists monarchy survived as long as it did. Also, how could a country that spawned some of the greatest thinkers of the enlightenment with some of the most elegant arguments for freedom and toleration stay under the yolk of a government that did not allow 90% of its people a voice in its management? I have stated here the reasons and arguments that the French Revolution was a historical necessity. The way that events played out during the revolution (at least the first part of it) almost seemed to indicate how ripe France was for revolution. The ease at which the government crumbled and the groundswell of popular participation in the Capitol and the provinces being prime examples of this ripening. Perhaps it is the curse of Western civilization, but people just want to be free and respected.

Notes

1 J.H. Shennan, *France before the Revolution* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1995), 5.

2 The term "Bourgeoisie" seemed too narrow at this point because many outside of this designation were literate, politically active citizens.

3 Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution* 5th ed. (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2010), 24.

4 Shennan, *France before the Revolution*, 37.